



February 22, 2023

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer written testimony regarding H.B. No. 6659:
AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025,
AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

My name is Tina Banas, LCSW, and I am the Director of Benchmark Infant and Toddler Services, providing early intervention under Birth-to-Three in CT. Our program operates in 41 CT towns within Fairfield and New Haven Counties, with over 950 children presently in our care. I am writing to express a request for continued financial support for the Birth-to-Three programs by providing the ongoing General Administration Payment (GAP) of \$200 per eligible child and for funding to support Spanish language interpretation.

Benchmark is one of 19 business programs contracted to serve children with delays, disabilities, and diagnosed conditions such as Autism. We represent the Birth-to-Three system of care which provides critical early intervention services to CT families, addressing treatment to enhance optimal child development in the multiple domains of physical, cognitive, language and speech, self-help, and social emotional development. Early intervention through Birth to Three Services has demonstrated success in:

- Increasing outcomes for young children and families
- Reducing need for special education services
- Reducing cost to communities for Special Education services

Birth to Three in CT operates as a “fee for service model” and has been funded as a flat rate contract without consideration of COLA or other increases that were granted to other child serving programs. As a result, maintaining services has been increasingly challenging given:

- Increased operational costs
 - Impact of inflation and general cost of doing business; increased gas prices for travel and increased staff benefit costs
 - Need for increased professional wages to be competitive
 - Losses experienced by the pandemic
- Professional staffing shortages
 - Felt across the state and nationally
 - Shortage of bilingual Spanish speaking staff

Today, I am writing on behalf of Benchmark Infant and Toddler Services in support of:

- Maintaining the increased general administrative payment (GAP) in the amount of \$200/month for each child who qualifies. This was recently raised from \$100 to \$200 on a temporary basis. This increase (while comparatively small) has helped to stabilize our program, enabling Benchmark to continue to meet the needs of Connecticut children and families. The GAP

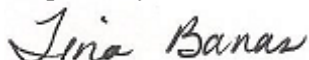
payment helps programs offset some of the costs associated with training and supervision of staff, and provides sustainability within the overall fee for service reimbursement structure. To ensure state and federal requirements are met, staff must be highly qualified and participate in ongoing training. The amount of unreimbursed training requirements for newly hired staff results in a delay to the provision of direct services which leads both to a loss of revenue for programs and a delay to much needed services for families. Therefore, granting funds to support a permanent increase of the GAP payment to \$200 will assist all Birth-to-Three programs in meeting the current increased cost of business and ensure all programs will remain operational. This is critical especially as Birth-to-Three is experiencing unprecedented numbers of children being referred and found eligible for early intervention services.

- Granting funding to support all language translation services for families within the CT Birth-to-Three system. Early Intervention Programs utilize highly trained interpreters to support the language needs of families whose primary language is other than English. Under the current reimbursement procedure in Birth-to-Three, interpretation during evaluation services is reimbursable for all languages; however, interpretation reimbursement during treatment sessions and family meetings is available for all languages except Spanish. This practice is not equitable to families and it disincentivizes the use of highly qualified and certified interpreters. Additionally, it is not enough to rely on programs to employ sufficient Spanish speaking professional staff, particularly due to staffing shortages.
 - Spanish is the second largest primary language in CT and represents a significant group of families served by Birth-to-Three, many who live in urban and/or low income and underserved communities.
 - Staffing shortages and lack of funding to provide competitive wages for bilingual Spanish speaking workers has made it impossible to provide bilingual providers to work with all families whose primary language is Spanish.
 - Programs are incurring additional costs for translation, even when sessions are cancelled. This is costly and not sustainable, considering the increased number of children in our care.
 - Not being able to provide language services for Spanish speaking families creates a gross inequity to these families, impacts short and long term child outcomes for Spanish families, and furthers the racial divides in CT.

In an effort to stabilize Birth-to-Three services in CT, I strongly encourage your support of funding that will *maintain the \$200 monthly GAP payment for enrolled children who qualify*; and determine to provide equal access to translation services by *allocating funds to provide reimbursement for **all language translation** services needed when working with families to ensure equitable and quality services, and optimal outcomes for vulnerable children.*

Thank you for your service to Connecticut and consideration of this testimony which I believe speaks to the critical funding needed to supporting the Birth-to-Three system of care for young children in CT.

Respectfully,



Tina Banas, LCSW, Director
Benchmark Human Services, Infant & Toddlers
tbanas@benchmarkhs.com